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NEWS RELEASE

Sept. 9, 2009

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MONTANA KIDS COUNT HOLDS EARLY CHILDHOOD BUSINESS SUMMITS

MISSOULA —

Montana KIDS COUNT held a series of early childhood business summits with business leaders around the state to gain their perspectives on early childhood issues and family-friendly work practices in their communities.

Sponsored by Montana KIDS COUNT, the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation, Childcare Resource and Referral Network, the Bureau of Business & Economic Research, CTA Architects Engineers and other local partners, the business summits were conducted Aug. 14-17 in **Missoula, Havre, Billings, Hamilton and Kalispell**. They informed community business leaders about research on investing in early childhood education and told them how business partners can be part of local efforts to build early childhood foundations for children and families.

About eight to 15 invited guests attended each event. Julie Ehlers, communications director for Montana KIDS COUNT, provided a brief presentation on research of brain development in young children and showcased how understanding early childhood issues affects Montana's future and current work force.

"The brain develops in a systematic manner," Ehlers said, "which is why providing for children from birth to 5 years is so important. Adults need to interact with children to teach them not only cognitive skills but also the 'soft skills' that are so important in business, such as being able to communicate and being punctual."

A local expert from each community provided insight on available resources and efforts. Daphne Herling, director of Montana KIDS COUNT, led a group discussion to hear participants' thoughts and perceptions on early childhood issues.

"We often hear from the advocates that they know the business community needs to be part of building a strong early childhood education system in Montana; however, they struggle with how to do this," Herling said. "These summits gave us the opportunity to hear directly from business people how they want to be engaged and what are the early childhood issues important to them."

Many participants mentioned the need to find adequate, affordable childcare to reduce the strain that issue puts on their employees.

The information gathered in each city will be tabulated and compiled into a report outlining the findings, which will be distributed statewide. The report will include a tool kit for advocates of early childhood development, information on how to work with local businesses and a list of "business champions" willing to help with future efforts in each community.

The Montana KIDS COUNT program is a statewide effort to identify the status and well-being of Montana children by collecting data about them and publishing an annual data book each fall.

For more information on the business summits, contact Montana KIDS COUNT at 406-243-5113 or e-mail julie.ehlers@business.umt.edu.

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